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WEST FORK OF SWIFT CREEK TIMBER SALE PROJECT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Headquarters of Stillwater State Forest at Olney

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Stillwater State Forest, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, is proposing a timber sale that would log 5 to 9.5 million board feet (1,250 to 2,000 log truck loads) of timber. The trees would be harvested from 938 to 1,270 acres, depending on the alternative chosen. The West Fork Timber Sale Project is located approximately 20 air miles north of Whitefish, Montana in Sections 18, 19, 20, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, and 33, Township 34 north, Range 23 west, and Section 13, Township 34 north, Range 24 west (*WEST FORK TIMBER SALE PROJECT VICINITY MAP* is on page 3).

In addition to harvesting timber:

- At least one wooden bridge in the project area would be replaced. Currently, the bridge on Stryker Basin Road cannot support heavy machinery or fire engines. The bridge would be replaced with a 75-foot steel bridge.
- Several deteriorating log and earthen stream crossings would be removed.
- Approximately 3 miles of new road would be built to access harvest areas; following harvesting operations, these roads would be grass seeded and closed to prevent motorized use.
- Roads used for hauling would be improved to meet Montana Best Management Practice (BMP) standards.
- Logged areas would be prepared to grow new trees by either broadcast burning or piling slash and scarifying the ground to allow seeds to germinate or trees to be planted.

The primary purposes of this timber sale project is to provide income for the school trust, grow new stands of healthy trees, and improve the growth and vigor of the trees remaining in the timber stands.

The West Fork bridge is no longer able to support the weight of heavy equipment and fire engines.

A variety of winter and summer recreational uses occur on the forest.

Many animals, including the whitetail deer, use the forest for feeding and raising their young.

Public Concerns

In April of 2001, a letter was mailed informing the public that the West Fork of Swift Creek area was being considered for a timber sale proposal by DNRC. The letter and an information pamphlet (Initial Proposal) provided the project's objectives, maps, an overview of past timber harvesting, and the potential for a new timber harvest. The letter also asked for responses if there were concerns about a timber sale in this area; 10 responses were received.

A team made up of foresters, a wildlife specialist, a hydrologist, a fisheries biologist, an engineer, and an economist was formed to study the public's concerns and the West Fork area. This team is called the Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team).

By discussing the concerns and studying the area, we found that effects the proposed timber sale project would have on the following resources or issues needed to be explained.

- Vegetation (trees)
- Hydrology (water)
- Soils
- Fisheries
- Wildlife
  - Threatened and Endangered Species
    - Bald eagle
    - Canada lynx
    - Gray wolf
    - Grizzly bear
  - Sensitive Species
    - Fishers
    - Pileated woodpeckers
  - Big Game Species (deer, elk, and moose)
- Economics
- Management of roads

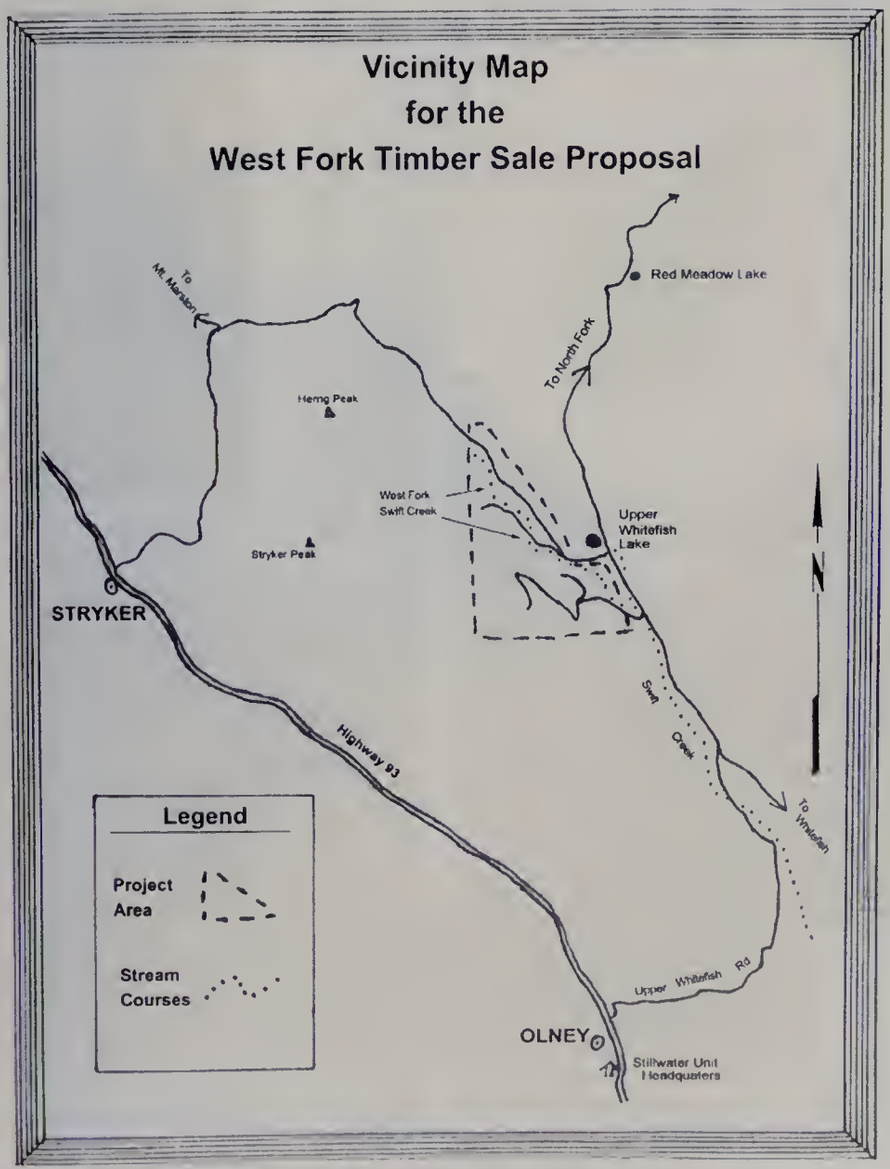
Developing the Project and Displaying the Concerns

During the period when ID Team was developing plans for the timber sale, the Land Board in Helena adopted the State Forest Land Management Rules (SFLM Rules). These rules provide guidance on how DNRC will manage their forests and deal with specific items that need to be considered when planning and conducting a timber sale. The ID Team was directed to follow these rules as they worked to finalize the timber sale proposal.

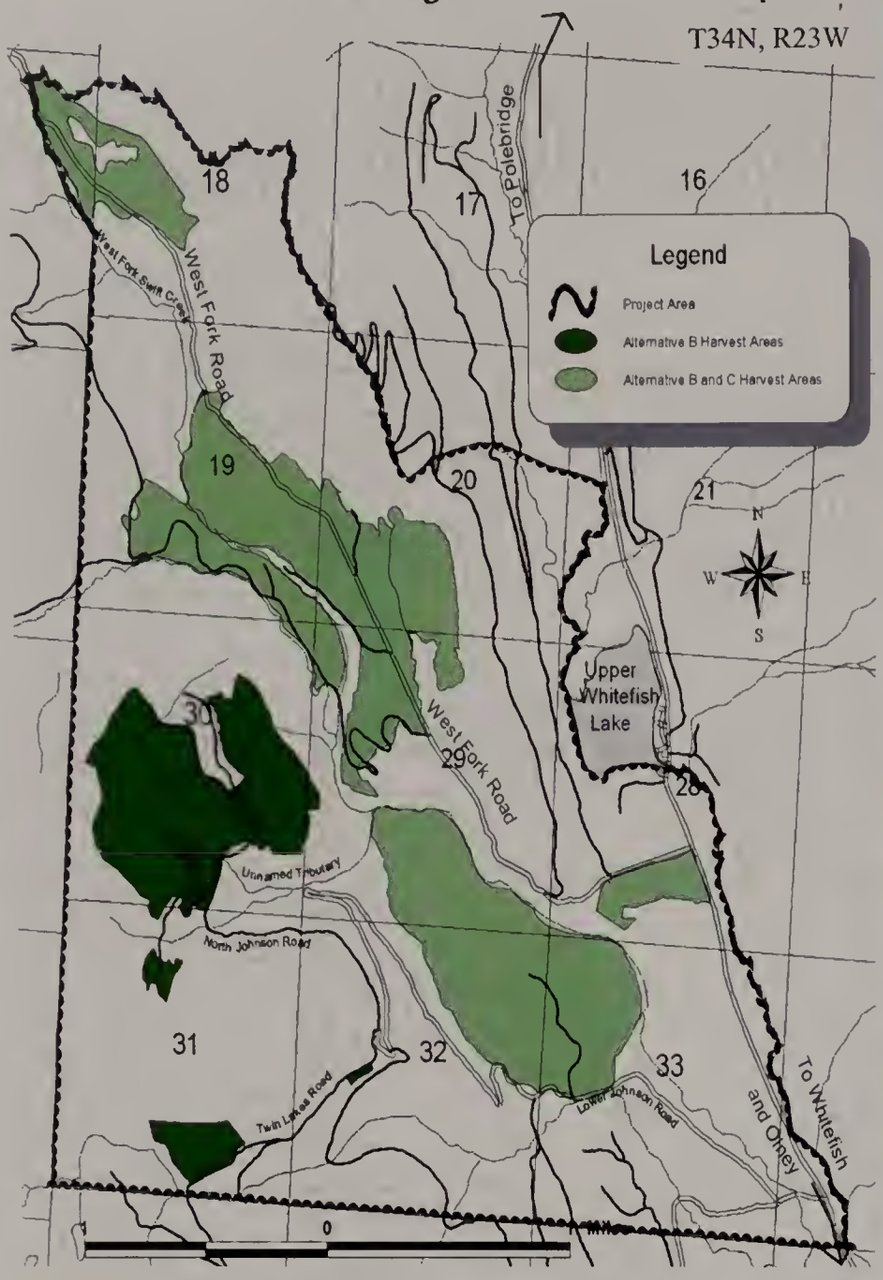
In general these rules cover:

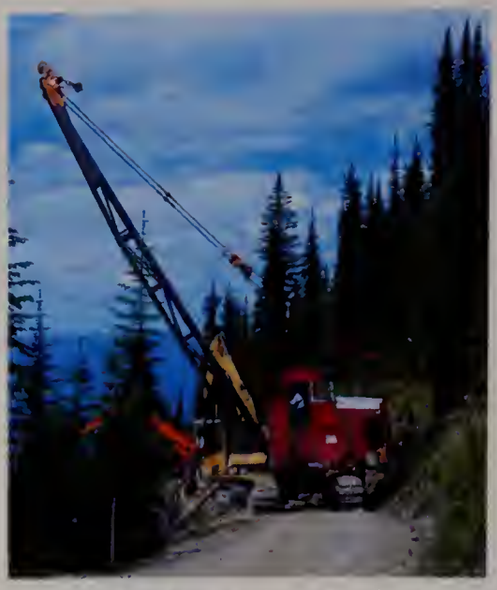
- management for biodiversity, where the forest conditions are managed for an appropriate mix of stand structures and forest types;
- management of roads;
- management of watersheds;
- management of fisheries;
- management of wildlife species, including those listed as threatened and endangered and sensitive, and big game;
- weed management; and
- economics.

The SFLM Rules may be found on the web at: www.dnrc.state.mt.us/trust/fmb.htm

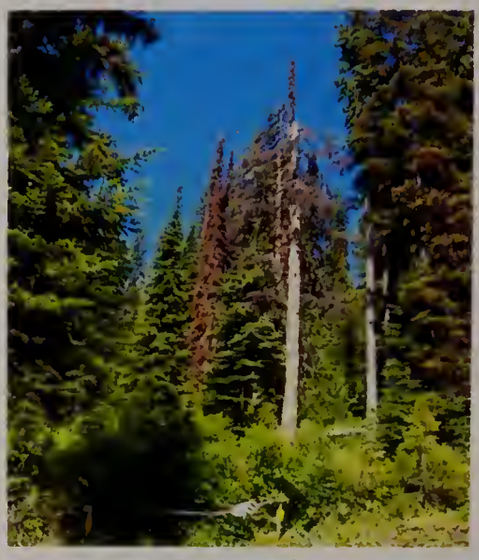


Timber-Harvesting Alternative Map





Skyline harvesting equipment like this 'line machine' would be used to harvest trees from the steeper areas.



Trees, such as this dying and dead subalpine fir, would be harvested with both action alternatives.

Income from timber sales is deposited into the State's general fund to subsidize schools such as the West Valley and Bissell grade schools in Flathead. County.

The timber stand conditions include poor tree crowns.

Alternatives

After studying the list of concerns, 3 possible choices (alternatives) were developed by the ID Team. Each alternative was designed to address a particular concern or group of concerns.

- ***No-Action Alternative A***
  - No trees would be cut.
  - No roads would be improved.
  - Road maintenance projects, access to fight fires, recreation, and timber salvaging would continue as it does now.
  - No money would be contributed to the school trust funds or the Forest Improvement program.
- ***Action Alternative B***
  - 1,270 acres of timber would be harvested.
  - 9.5 million board feet of timber would be purchased by sawmills.
  - 31 miles of road would be improved and 3.4 miles of new roads would be built.
  - 2 bridges would be replaced to allow access to more acres for forest-management and fire-protection activities.
  - Approximately $680,000 would be contributed to the school trust funds and $630,000 would be contributed to the Forest Improvement program.
- ***Action Alternative C***
  - 938 acres of timber would be harvested.
  - 5.7 million board feet of timber would be purchased by sawmills.
  - 24.5 miles of roads would be improved and 3.1 miles of new roads would be built.
  - 1 bridge would be replaced to allow access to more acres for forest-management and fire-protection activities.
  - Approximately $360,000 would be contributed to the school trust funds and $380,000 to the Forest Improvement program.

A landscape view of proposed Harvest Area I. Approximately 72 acres would be commercially thinned.

Though erosion-control measures would be taken, temporary increases in sediment to the streams would occur during the installation of culverts or bridges. Once installed, the annual sediment delivery would decrease to less than the current amount.

Alternatives:

GENERAL DIFFERENCES

Action Alternative B has several issues that are different than No-Action Alternative A and Action Alternative C. These are:

- Alternative B proposes to harvest the same areas as Alternative C, plus an additional 308 acres in another part of the project area.
- These additional acres in Action Alternative B are accessed by roads that are currently restricted from public motorized use. The SFLM Rules guide us to look for other roads to temporarily "restrict" while the additional 332 acres are being logged.
- Alternative B proposes to harvest approximately 286 acres in stands that meet DNRC's old-growth definition, while Alternative C does not enter old-growth stands.
- Logging operations for Alternative B would be more difficult than logging operations under Alternative C. Specialized skyline cable equipment would be required to reach some areas.
- The value of the timber in Alternative B is higher due to the size and quality of the trees and the high number of trees per acre.

GENERAL SIMILARITIES

In addition to the information provided on the front page of this summary:

- Both action alternatives would harvest areas that were logged in the 1940s and 1950s. These areas, now full of Engelmann spruce and subalpine fir, should be growing more western larch and western white pine.
- Both action alternatives would temporarily restrict 2 miles of roads that are currently open to public motorized use.

This broken native bridge is located on a stream in Section 30. Under Action Alternative B, this bridge would be removed and the banks would be restored to prevent debris from falling into the stream.

Excess slash on a regeneration-harvest area would be piled and burned. A mixture of tree species (such as western larch, Douglas-fir, lodgepole pine, and whitebark pine) would be planted in the harvest area. This is an example of Harvest Area III after harvesting.

Information and Overview of the DEIS

This Executive Summary of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the West Fork Timber Sale Project is prepared in accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) rules. Information in this summary is written to make the project easily understood with the supporting photographs and maps.

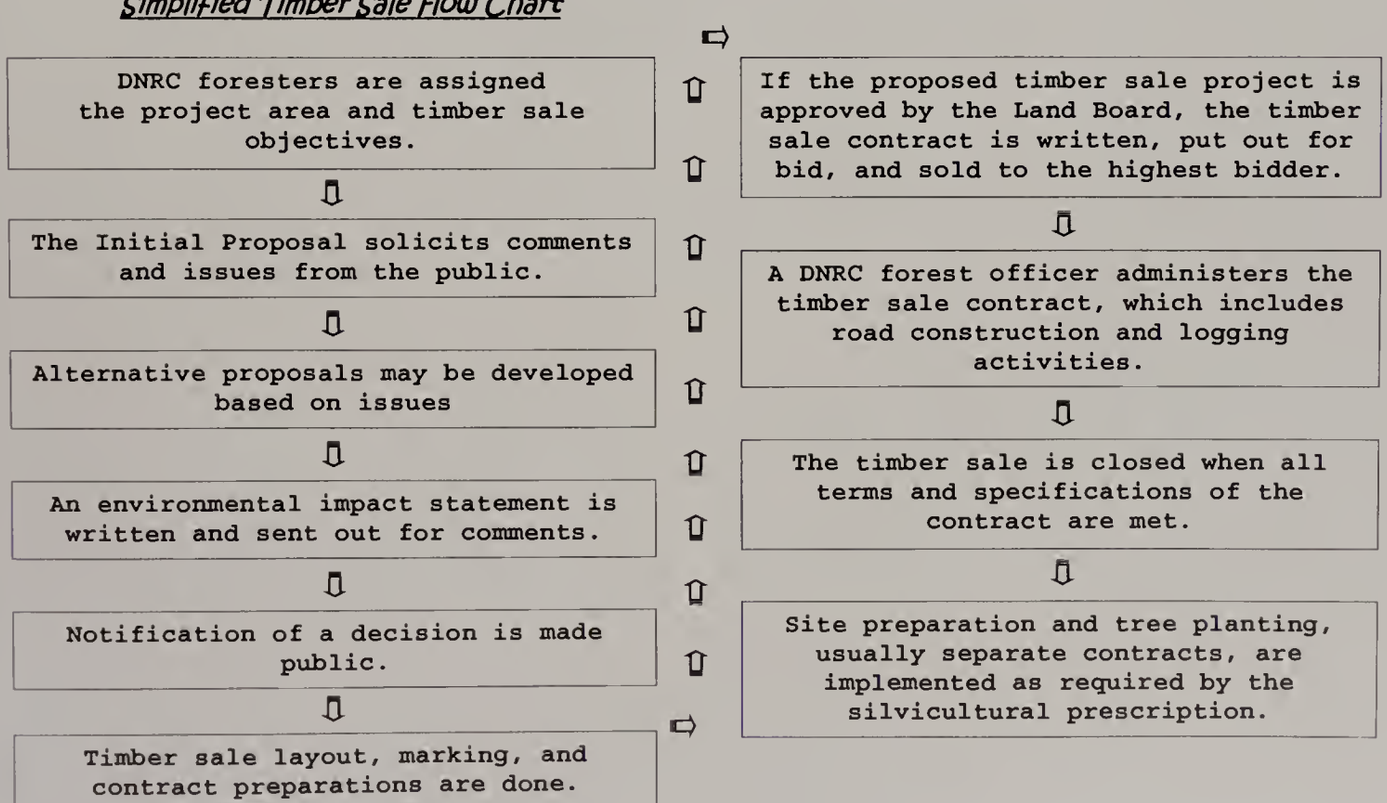
The DEIS contains a more complete description of the purpose, development, analysis, and conclusions of the proposed project. Appendices on specific resources (water quality, wildlife, soil, etc.) are also included in the DEIS. The resource appendices were written by the ID Team and include lengthy technical discussions of methodology (set of procedures), research, the monitoring of baseline data, analyses, etc. The DEIS summarizes the resource appendices in plain language, thus ensuring that all interested parties, regardless of their scientific or technical abilities, can understand this proposal and it effects.

Because the analysis work required highly advanced technical procedures and terminology, the information in the appendices would be necessary for any scientific, technical, or legal review.

To receive a copy of the West Fork Timber Sale Project DEIS and its resource appendices, contact Michael McMahon by calling (406)881-2670, Margaret Beck (406-881-2371), or writing to Stillwater State Forest, P.O. Box 164, Olney, MT 59927. The documents are also available at the *www.dnrc.state.mt.us* website.

The DEIS and appendices will be sent to people that have, over the course of this project, requested the documents. A 30-day public comment period will be open until November 20, 2004. At the end of the comment period, a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) will be developed, published, and sent to those receiving the DEIS. At least 15 days following publication of the FEIS, Robert Sandman, Stillwater State Forest Unit Manager, will choose an alternative or a combination of alternatives. This decision will be recommended to the State Board of Land Commissioners. The Land Board has the ultimate decision responsibility.

Simplified Timber Sale Flow Chart



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